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Dr Chris Gerry  
The Executive Principal  
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Dear Dr Gerry

Academies' initiative: monitoring visit to New Line Learning Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with John Kennedy HMI to your academy on 17 and 18 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies' initiative.

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the head of the academy, the executive principal, members of the senior leadership team, a group of students, the chair of governors and a sponsor governor.

## Context

New Line Learning Academy is part of the New Line Learning Academies Federation; it is part of a hard federation with Cornwallis Academy. It has specialisms in business and enterprise and vocational education. It opened in September 2007 following the amalgamation of two predecessor schools, but the two did not come together on the same site until June 2008. Until this time the two schools were led separately. An executive principal and vice principal provide strategic leadership for both academies. New Line Learning Academy is led on a day-to-day basis by a head of school and a leadership team. A new building is currently under construction, but the academy does not expect to move into it until September 2010.

There are 781 students on roll in Years 7 to 11. Sixth-form provision is to be offered at New Line Learning Academy from September this year in conjunction with the Cornwallis Academy. Most of the students are of White British origin, although a small but significant number of the remaining students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is high, as is the proportion who have a learning difficulty or disability. The academy has a unit with eight places for students who have physical disability. It is a non-selective school in a selective area. Attainment on entry is very low. When they started at the academy in September 2007, the attainment of the current Year 11 was exceptionally low, as was their attendance.

The academy has faced difficulties with the recruitment and retention of staff. Sharing the expertise of staff across both academies in the federation has helped ease the situation.

### Achievement and standards

In 2008, the proportion of students gaining five good passes at GCSE was very low. When English and mathematics are included, the proportion gaining five good passes was exceptionally low. Not surprisingly, the students had made inadequate progress from their already low starting points at the beginning of Year 10 and from the start of their secondary school education in Year 7. Their achievement was inadequate. The academy is determined to put these results behind them and has very high aspirations for students' future attainment.

There are significant barriers that the academy will have to overcome if its ambitions for the students' attainment are to be realised. First, attendance is exceptionally low and the proportion of students who are persistent absentees is high. The number of days lost through exclusion is also high. Second, many of the older students have had disrupted experiences in the past and are not enthused by learning; some students' behaviour has presented challenges. Finally, the teaching has not been of sufficiently high quality to make sure that everyone makes the progress that they should over time. The impact of the academy's strategies for tackling these important areas is discussed in more detail below.

There are signs that the rate of progress is improving and more students are on course to reach their targets or are working at appropriate levels for their age. This has been brought about because the academy's systems for monitoring attainment and tracking progress are more robust, which means that interventions can be targeted more specifically at groups and individual students. Considerable efforts have gone in to supporting and boosting the attainment of the current Year 11 students. There have also been improvements to the overall quality of teaching which have contributed to better progress. Finally, coming together on one site and working as one academy have led to greater consistency in expectations and approaches.

The academy predicts that the proportion of students gaining five good passes at GCSE, including English and mathematics, will increase substantially this year. Although the results will probably not reach the government's floor target, far more students are predicted to attain the grades that they should, given their prior attainment.

### Personal development and well-being

The academy has made good progress in improving students' behaviour. During this visit, students generally behaved well in lessons and around the site. Students themselves report that behaviour is better. They were polite and friendly when spoken to, and willing to talk about the academy and how they are doing. In lessons, they often showed interest in their work and responded positively to the teacher's interventions. Where teaching was especially strong, the students' enjoyment was clearly evident.

The number of fixed-term exclusions has reduced steadily, although the number of days has increased. This is because the academy is making explicit its expectations of how students should behave, and is making sure that messages are consistent. There are fewer incidents that merit exclusion, but of greater severity. This has also contributed to an increase in permanent exclusion. Targeted work with students who have particular needs has shown some success. Students say that they feel safe at the academy.

The academy is striving to break the culture of poor attendance but it is firmly entrenched with many students. Although there have been minor improvements and successes with individuals, the overall rate of attendance is still far too low and presents a major obstacle to raising standards. There are wide variations in attendance between tutor groups in the same year group and there are still too many students whose attendance falls below 80%. Arriving at the academy on time in the mornings is also difficult for some students. Steps have yet to be taken to tackle this. A change in leadership has brought renewed vigour to how low attendance is being challenged.

### Quality of provision

The academy has focused its efforts on dealing with inadequate teaching, with some success. The proportion of inadequate teaching has reduced because teachers have been supported to improve their practice, or have left the academy. Attention is now being given to increasing the amount of good teaching and spreading the good practice that already exists, for example at the 'Friday Forum'. During this inspection, the teaching observed ranged from outstanding to inadequate. The academy's records confirm this picture, and show that teaching is not yet consistently good enough to give the maximum boost to students' progress. The leadership team is determined that the proportion of good teaching will rise sharply.

There were strengths in many lessons. These included a good variety of teaching and learning styles; thought had clearly been given to finding ways to interest and engage students. Lesson plans were clear, the lesson was well structured and learning intentions were explicit. How additional adults were to support learning was clearly set out. A few very skilled teachers used questioning effectively to challenge the students to think, as well as to check their understanding. In many lessons, there was a good rapport between the teachers and students. Students who have particular needs were well supported. The 'pit stop' provision works well for those who are out of lessons.

Where teaching was satisfactory or inadequate, there were some common weaknesses. How additional adults were to be used was not made clear. Some teachers had difficulties in making sure that all of the students were listening or purposefully occupied and carried on teaching when students' attention was elsewhere. Opportunities for students to work in groups or pairs were missed. Although students' attitudes to learning have improved along with their behaviour, there are still some who are reluctant to participate and others who lack confidence in their abilities. Poor or erratic attendance means that some students have gaps in their learning or do not consolidate and build on what they have learned in lessons.

The academy is adopting an innovative approach to organising subjects and how they are taught, which will be fully realised in its new building. Years 7 and 8 are taught for much of their time in 'Learning Plazas'. These are large, open teaching spaces with tiered seating, enormous projection screens and flexible lighting. Here, teachers work in teams with teaching assistants and teach sixty or so students at a time. Lessons are planned around 'explorers' which includes English and humanities or 'discovery' that encompasses mathematics and science. There are evident strengths in this approach in that its novelty has the potential to engage the students and strengths in teaching can be used to good effect. There are also potential weaknesses. Some sessions did not make the most of the skills of all of the teaching staff present. The academy is rightly evaluating the effectiveness of the learning plazas and their impact on students' progress. One report on 'discovery' pointed out that science and mathematics do not always lend themselves to being taught in this way and highlighted other possible pitfalls. The effectiveness of this approach depends a great deal on the skill and expertise of the teachers. At the moment, their ability to act on the recommendations arising from consultants' reports varies.

The academy is operating a two-year programme at Key Stage 3 and students begin studying for their GCSEs in Year 9. Some students gain GCSE passes in Year 10, which is highly motivating, and others have the opportunity for a second attempt in Year 11 if they are not successful. It also means that students can begin sixth-form courses in Year 11. The academy offers courses that match students' learning styles. There is a good balance of academic and vocational studies that suits students' aspirations. There is a wide range of extra-curricular provision including sporting activities, catch-up clubs and a young farmers' club which is particularly well attended.

The academy's specialisms are not yet having a strong impact on all aspects of provision and outcomes for the students. However, there are clear plans to improve this. Partnership work with other schools is developing well and the academy is involved in the diploma for business administration and finance. The academy has yet to explore fully how the specialisms can contribute to efforts to improve attendance.

Action to improve attendance is robust, well coordinated and well led. Similarly, the academy has a good range of systems to make sure that behaviour is managed consistently. The academy provides very good targeted support for its most vulnerable students. A personalised approach is adopted to try to meet the needs of students who have become disaffected with learning. Procedures for protecting students are robust and well understood. The academy also makes sure that the required checks are carried out on everyone who works there.

### Leadership and management

The head of school and senior leaders provide strong direction for the academy's work. The recent merger of the two schools on the one site was smoothly and skilfully managed. Senior leaders share a clear understanding that the academy's prime purpose is to raise standards, and have a secure knowledge of the barriers that need to be overcome in order to do this. There is a high degree of honesty about areas of weakness. The academy commissions many reviews and evaluations of aspects of its work, and some of them do not pull their punches. They also contain many recommendations for action. In addition, the academy has a wealth of data at its disposal about students' attainment, progress, attendance, additional needs and so on. At the moment, it is not clear that the key messages are being identified from all of these different sources of information. The academy is commissioning sophisticated software that will analyse information about individual students and look for conclusions beyond the obvious.

Middle leadership is developing well and is stronger than in the past. Support from the Cornwallis Academy has helped bolster subject leadership and strengthen teaching. Individual departments have drawn up action plans to address areas of weakness, derived from their self-evaluation procedures and from available data. The plans, however, lack clarity in how progress and impact are to be monitored and evaluated.

The academy's overall plan for improvement gives an overview of steps to be taken in important areas. It contains very challenging targets for attendance, the quality of teaching and examination success. None of the targets is likely to be met within the timescale, and the target for attendance is unrealistic. The process of setting targets is not yet firmly rooted in current data and rates of progress. The progress that the academy has made so far in raising standards and improving behaviour, together with the evidence that more recent initiatives are beginning to pay dividends, shows that there is satisfactory capacity to continue to improve.

## External support

The academy has been proactive in seeking support from a range of independent providers, consultants from the national strategies and from its sister academy. Actions have been targeted on the most important areas. The School Improvement Partner is a good critical friend. The impact of external support shows in the progress that has been made in raising standards across the academy, and especially with the current Year 11 students.

## Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress. This visit has raised some concerns about the students' attendance and the academy's performance in improving it will be monitored.

## Priorities for further improvement

There are no priorities for further improvement over and above those that are already being addressed by the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill  
Her Majesty's Inspector